



## Women in Sport Coaching: Challenges, Stress and Wellbeing

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### Abstract

With a lack of women in leadership positions in sport, there are limited role models for women pursuing coaching careers and a number of traditional gender ideologies to overcome. Female coaches therefore face unique challenges, which can be vastly different to their male counterparts. This integrative review focused on the challenges that women face in the coaching domain and the impact that these can have on their well-being. Only four articles focused solely on female coaches since 2000. Despite the lack of literature several key themes have been identified. The main stressors relate to work-life balance, prolonged periods away from family, and a need to prove they are better than male coaches. Coping strategies focused on proactive anticipation and planning, and communication with others. There is also a lack of support for female coaches and inadequate salary to assist continued engagement. Developing female coaches through mentoring and gender specific coach education programs may counteract these issues.

### How to Cite

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## INTRODUCTION

Female sports coaches face distinctive challenges that cannot be easily removed from the profession (Jennifer et al., 2012). These include a traditionally male-dominant domain, lack of social networks and role models, and reported conflict between coaching and personal responsibilities (LaVoi & Dutove, 2012). Traditional social constructed gender ideology in sport has dictated that femininity is associated with more nurturing roles such as teaching, while masculinity is associated with competition and demonstrating sporting dominance (Williams, 1995). This has created barriers for females both entering coaching and their continued and prolonged engagement with coaching (Norman, 2012). Opportunities for women to enter the coaching field are limited (Cutler & Jackson, 2002). It is rare to see a women hired to work with male athletes, whilst it is common for men to coach women (Knoppers, 1992). For women who do make it in such a male-dominated environment they are left isolated and unsupported (Norman, 2012). All of these experiences can impact on female coaches' stress levels, sometimes leading to burnout (Durand-Bush et al., 2012), which links to their well-being.

There are numerous studies on well-being, stress, and burnout from an athlete perspective (Cronin & Allen, 2015; Lonsdale et al., 2009; McKay et al., 2008; Mellalieu et al., 2009) and how it can impact their performance, but limited investigation on sports coaches. Thelwell et al., (2008) stated that coaches are performers in their own right, and although their performance is a different kind to that of their athletes, they still need to cope with the stressors of competition (Olusoga et al., 2014). Coaches have performance-related stressors, which relate to their athletes' and their own performance (i.e. athlete preparation; opposition analysis; competition performance) (Olusoga et al., 2010). Coaches also have a number of organizational challenges (i.e. resources; finance; selection) that they must manage (Thelwell et al., 2008). The coach's ability to cope with these stressors is of importance as it can impact personal well-being and the ability to coach at high standards (Levy et al, 2009).

These stressors are not gender specific, rather common within sports coaching. However, women in coaching experience a number of additional stressors as compared to their male counterparts. Firstly, for women the coaching pathway has limited illumination and the struggle to become a coach starts early in their careers due to male hegemonic policing of sport and the sport

workplace (Norman, 2012). Second, in many cases the female coach is still the primary caregiver in the home (or perceived to be) causing increased strain on the work-home interface (Dixon et al., 2007). The third issue is isolation, there is a dearth of female role models in sport coaching for women to model and engage with and limited opportunity to form networks of support and learning (Norman, 2012; Shaw & Allen, 2009).

The purpose of this integrative review (Whittemore & Knafl, 2005) is to explore the evidence on women's experiences as sport coaches, the challenges they face and how this can affect their own well-being. The review focused on results from a thorough search of three electronic databases (SPORTDiscus; PsycINFO; and Google Scholar), conducted between March 2017 and June 2017. The search terms identified as relevant to this review comprised of: coach\*; women; challenges; stress; coping; well-being. Inclusion criteria were established to ensure results were relevant, which included peer-reviewed published articles, written in English, between January 2000 and June 2017. Articles were reviewed for appropriateness, via 1) the full title and keywords, 2) the abstract, and 3) the full text content (Bocarro, Greenwood, & Henderson, 2008). A total of 34 articles were identified. The methodology of these articles were read to identify the sex of the participant coaches, with 21 articles focused on women in coaching. Further analysis of the full text of this articles identified four studies related to stress and wellbeing.

## DISCUSSION

### Challenges for female coaches

Female coaches perceive a number of challenges within their role, which include: lack of support, job insecurity, inadequate salary, difficulties in working with parents / spectators, and coaching at evenings and weekends (Kubayi et al, 2017). While these challenges are not unique to female coaches, women in coaching positions do face greater challenges than their male counterparts (Lewis et al., 2018). Knoppers (1987) seminal work on gender and sports coaching recognised that many studies utilise an individual model, with the assumption that the workplace is shaped by those who work in it. The results of these occupational studies identified a number of characteristics that prevented women from flourishing. Knoppers concluded that greater opportunities for women in coaching, additional control over the coaching environment, and an increased proportion of women in leadership positions were crucial to overcome the barriers created.

Women who work in male-dominant environments are encouraged to “act like men”, dress like men and to be assertive, while men are taught to be sensitive to the needs of women (Schlesinger & Weigelt-Schlesinger, 2012). This could impact female coaches more than male coaches given the traditional gendered ideology in the male-dominated sport environment (Fielding-Lloyd & Meân, 2011). Roffey (2001) and Fox (1999) sought to explain the barriers female coaches faced, with perceptions of a strong old boys’ network, lack of opportunity, lack of compensation, and discrimination mentioned by female coaches as common factors. Norman (2010) supports this, with coaches in her investigation believing to have fewer opportunities for development than their male counterparts. Similarly, female coaches are under more pressure to assert themselves over male coaches for employment and had to cope with less financial reward than male coaches in similar positions (Caccese & Mayerberg, 1984). The development of pathways for women coaches (Lewis et al., 2018), the perceived support by the organisations specifically for women coaches (Vinson et al., 2016), and informal networking (Norman, 2012) are three key organisational constraints that influenced the experience of female coaches.

Navigating a path as a female coach is challenging at each stage of the career (LaVoi & Dutove, 2012). Entry is difficult; the workplace is built upon gendered ideology, and the bar set for success is higher than for male counterparts (Norman, 2010). Female coaches have reported that they feel they need to prove they are better than their male colleagues to stay in the profession (Pastore & Judd, 1993). For the female coach there is a fine line between challenge and negative stress and impact on sense of control, job satisfaction and overall wellbeing.

### **Stressors and coping**

All coaches face significant internal (i.e. meeting personal performance objectives; work-life balance; prolonged time away from family) and external (i.e. athlete performance; insufficient preparation time; managing financial support) demands in their coaching and personal life (Norris et al., 2017). At times, they perceive these demands to be greater than their resources that can result in experiences of stress. Commonly coaches identified themselves as stressed at least once in their career (Durand-Bush et al., 2012), and have experienced chronic stress leading to symptoms of burnout in their career (Lundkvist et al., 2012).

Specifically for female coaches stressors included the pressure of having numerous roles and responsibilities (LaVoi & Dutove., 2012), early mornings and long days/weeks (Olusoga et al, 2009), and

work-life conflict (Dixon et al., 2007). Women can experience greater stressors from the competing values of work and family than their male counterparts (Jennifer E Bruening et al., 2012). This may be an implication of traditional gender ideology, where women usually have greater responsibility to child care (Dixon et al., 2007). Bruening & Dixon (2007) argued that the promotion of a ‘sacrifice everything to win’ culture in sports coaching exacerbates work-life conflict.

Durand-Bush et al.’s (2012) found that female coaches used various coping strategies in response to stressful situations. They indicated that female coaches prevented stressful experiences by proactively anticipating, learning and exerting adaptive control when possible. Specifically the most common strategies employed to prevent stress included: preparation/planning; self-evaluation/reflection; and communication with others.

### **Female coach wellbeing**

Research into psychological and occupational wellbeing of sports coaches is scarce. Key findings, irrespective of gender, from the research have identified competence and autonomy to be influential to coach wellbeing (Stebbing et al, 2011). Similarly increased job security, development opportunities, and work-life balance promote positive wellbeing for coaches (Stebbing et al, 2012). For women in coaching this is a major concern, especially as they are recognised to have a disproportionate work-life balance, a lack of trust from their organisation, a lack of security in their role, and few opportunities to network (Norman et al., 2016). Female coaches had much greater scores in emotional exhaustion and significantly lower scores in personal accomplishment than male coaches (Caccese & Mayerberg, 1984). Kilo & Hassmén, (2016) reported that female coaches had higher levels of exhaustion and reduced accomplishment compared to male counterparts.

### **Strategies and Interventions**

Greater success has come from taking an organisational approach (Kanter, 2008). More recently, Kilo & Hassmén (2016) showed that organisational factors play an important role for understanding and avoiding burnout in sport coaches. Olusoga et al. (2009) suggested that addressing stressors proactively at an organisation level may reduce levels of coach burnout. Bentzen et al (2017) concur with this recommending organisations support coaches in balancing work and personal lives to encourage self-motivation and longitudinal engagement. Norman (2012) provided an alternative approach focusing on the inclusion of socio-cultural education programs that provided women clear understanding of current context and history of the situation.

She suggests taking this approach allows women in coaching to be better prepared for the challenges they will face. Norman (2012) recommended that female coaches should be provided with support programs that could assist in the promotion of equitable salaries, the fair treatment of female coaches, and alleviate all forms of discrimination.

Stebbing et al. (2011) suggest professional development that focuses on perceived and actual competence via training through courses, feedback, and goal setting, will enhance a coach's perception of competence. Coaches who perceive they were provided continued opportunities for professional development reported greater psychological needs satisfaction (Stebbing et al., 2012). Conversely, if coaches were not provided with professional development opportunities, they felt that they were being prohibited from developing their coaching skills, leading to a sense of lack of competence. It is important to position this professional development as relevant to all coaches and not to problematize women as not having the knowledge and skills required to coach (Vinson et al., 2016).

## CONCLUSION

A number of challenges and stressors experienced by coaches are independent of gender. These include: interpersonal relations between coach and athlete; team/athlete selection; perceived insufficient preparation time; and long hours consistent with coaching. At the same time several factors are identified that appear to have greater impact on female coaches. Findings suggest prolonged time away from family, particularly when the female coach is the primary care giver, can increase perceptions of stress and subsequently impact the well-being of these women. Further there is a continual need to prove they are better than other male coaches, with added stress coming from a self-imposed belief that their failure would negatively impact the whole female coach profession.

Proactive anticipation, preparation and planning are key for women (and men) in coaching. Identification of known stressful events and following pre-designed plans enables women in coaching to manage their own well-being more effectively. Reflection, self-evaluation and discussion with others is also key. However, the lack of social networks and role models providing effective support can make this more difficult for women.

There also appears to be a consistent lack of support for female coaches. There is a strong male hegemony traditionally in sports coaching

and some discrimination of women in the profession. Women are also underrepresented in leadership positions in sports organisations, resulting in an inability to encourage gender diversity in the recruitment of coaches. Cultural matching, the phenomenon of selecting people similar to you, increases the likelihood that males in leadership roles are more likely to recruit male coaches. This hegemonic masculinity makes it more challenging for women to develop within the coaching domain. Sports organisations need to address this as a means to promote prolonged engagement of women in sports coaching. Development of gender specific networking groups and coach education programs, which also explain how coaching has come to the current status quo, may begin to address these issues (Norman, 2012).

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